

NEWS

Residents ask DNR to keep Square Lake trout-free



A rainbow trout slips through the grasp of technician James Stone of Peterson State Fish Hatchery after being freed from the shallows of Square Lake, where 2,000 of the fish were released in October 2011. (Pioneer Press archive: Richard Marshall)

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PUBLISHED: March 8, 2017 at 1:31 pm | UPDATED: March 8, 2017 at 4:32 pm

Square Lake in May Township hasn't been stocked with trout since the spring of 2012 — a move that lake residents and the watershed district say has noticeably improved water clarity.

But the Department of Natural Resources would like to start putting trout back into the northern Washington County lake, saying it provides one of the few trout-fishing opportunities in the metro area.

“Every year since they stopped restocking, the water clarity has improved,” said Rich Cummings, one of the lake residents. “You can see further into the water column now than you could three or four years ago.”

Rainbow trout eat a zooplankton called daphnia, which, in turn, feeds on smaller phytoplankton, or algae, which bloom in warm weather and cloud water, he said.

“When the trout are there, they are eating the critters that help keep the water clean,” Cummings said. “The more daphnia you have in water, the clearer the water is going to be.”

He said trout fishing also increases the risk of invasive species in Square Lake, as trout fishermen are known to travel from one trout lake to another.

DNR officials agreed to the moratorium in 2012 at the request of residents and the watershed district.

But after more than four years of study, DNR officials say they are not convinced that trout are the sole cause of any decline.

Square Lake used to be stocked annually with trout yearlings — 3,000 in the spring and 2,000 in the fall — and anglers are keen to have it stocked again, said TJ DeBates, east metro area fisheries supervisor. The lake has been stocked, off and on, since 1974.

“It’s the lake, in the whole east-metro area, that we get the most calls and emails regarding — and that includes White Bear, Bald Eagle and Big Marine,” DeBates said. “There just aren’t a lot of trout opportunities in the area.”

The next closest locations? Cenaiko Lake in Anoka County and Holland Lake in Dakota County, he said.

Trout are especially popular with anglers because they are fun to catch and good to eat, said Harland Hiemstra, DNR spokesman. “They take bait right away, and they put up a little bit of a fight,” he said. “They have a number of factors going for them in terms of providing a recreational opportunity for anglers, and there are limited places where we can provide that.”

OFFERING A COMPROMISE

DeBates will meet with representatives of the Square Lake Homeowners Association and the Carnelian-Marine St. Croix Watershed District at 6:30 p.m. Wednesday, March 8, at Scandia Community Center. He said he will propose that the lake be stocked only in the spring for the next three years for a “put-and-take” fishing opportunity. Stocking would be done before the fishing opener on May 13, with the intention that the trout would be caught soon.

The DNR would use the three-year period to do more research about a possible relationship between the rainbow trout, the zooplankton they eat and the water clarity, he said.

“Nothing has been decided,” DeBates said. “Right now we are just analyzing data and trying to figure out the next steps. We will continue to work with local interests, and we will continue to base our decisions on science.”

The trout are not native to Square Lake and will not reproduce. Like other game fish released in metro lakes — such as walleye and muskies — the trout are stocked using proceeds from fishing license sales and trout stamp proceeds.

Jim Shaver, administrator of the Carnelian-Marine-St. Croix Watershed District, said he hopes that the DNR will decide to continue the moratorium.

“The watershed district has spent a lot of time and effort — more than 15 years — verifying the trend and establishing the cause of the declining water clarity in Square Lake,” he said. “It is disappointing to see this accepted scientific result compromised by a response to a very limited segment of the angling community.”

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Mary Divine is a reporter for the St. Paul Pioneer Press. She covers Washington County and the St. Croix River Valley, but has also spent time covering the state Capitol. She has won numerous journalism awards, including the Premack Award and the Minnesota Society of Professional Journalists' Page One Award. Prior to joining the Pioneer Press in 1998, she worked for the Rochester, Minn., Post-Bulletin and at the St. Joseph, Mo., News-Press. Her work has also appeared in a number of magazines, including Mpls/St. Paul Magazine, Twin Cities Business Monthly and Minnesota Magazine. She is a graduate of Carleton College.

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